Iowa's country schools. It helped improve educational opportunities for thousands of Iowa children. But there would be bumps in the road that limited the impact of this landmark legislation.

In 1920, when the standard school law went into effect, more than half of Iowa's public school students were attending one- and two-room country schools. School participation in the program increased rapidly. By 1924, roughly one out of ten of Iowa's country schools had qualified, and there were standard schools in all but a few Iowa counties. State Superintendent May E. Francis noted its success in "raising the standard of the rural schools...as it has improved the type of building. Instead of the unattractive, inefficient box model, the new buildings have modern plans employing in most cases finished basements, modern light, heating and ventilating systems, and often chemical toilets." She praised the legislature, calling the law a "turning point in Iowa's educational policy." "Of the hundreds of millions that the farmer has paid into the state treasury for the support of education in general in the state of Iowa," Francis remarked, "this is the first attempt to give his school some direct benefit from it."

The DPI's 1925 Regulations for Standardizing Common Schools articulated the kinds of improvements that county superintendents were instructed to look for during their evaluations. Fifty-three standards with various point values were grouped under six categories—grounds and outbuildings; the schoolhouse; equipment and care of the schoolroom; library and supplementary readers; teacher and academic requirements; and community activities. For example, if a teacher was judged to be excellent or superior, the school received six points. If the school had a vestibule and separate cloak closets for boys and girls, it earned three points. To be deemed "standard," a school needed 80 points out of 100. Scores of 85 the second year and 90 the third were required to continue the designation. (See right and page 136: This rating card, circa 1928, shows the revised scoring.)

The annual appropriation of $100,000 to fund the standard school program was more than adequate to start with, but already by the 1923/24 school year, the

May Francis championed "the smallest school unit"

P. E. McClenahan was the state superintendent of public instruction when the standard school law was adopted. But it was May E. Francis who championed the cause for the country schools. Her advocacy for country schools in general helped get her elected state superintendent, but it also forced her from that office.

Francis began her career as a country school teacher and was then elected county superintendent in Bremer County. In 1919 she was hired by McClenahan to be the first inspector of rural schools at the Iowa Department of Public Instruction. Her responsibilities included preparing and administering the first regulations for standard schools.

Francis surprised the educational establishment by announcing her decision to run for state superintendent in 1922, opposing the man who had hired her. Another candidate, W. H. Bender, decided to run as well, thus creating a three-way race for the Republican nomination.

Francis campaigned on her support for country schools and on spending restraint. "I believe that the taxpayers, especially of the rural districts, should not be called upon to expend millions of dollars for palatial school buildings. Rather we should improve buildings and equipment, and with less of the taxpayers' money, lift the standard rural schools to a place of paramount importance in our educational system," she wrote in Midland Schools.

"I shall inaugurate a policy of ever advancing in school affairs....[yet] measure this advancement by the rule of conservation, sanity and safety. This in order that fads and fadism shall not run rampant like a hungry lion, devouring the hard-earned dollars of the taxpayer.... Progress and advance for the smallest school unit—the rural school."

Francis won a close primary election and then trounced her Democratic opponent in the general election, becoming the first woman elected to statewide public office in Iowa. Historian David Reynolds noted: "She became the first state superintendent in more than a generation not to tout school consolidation as the only effective means of improving the quality of rural schools."

Her troubled tenure as state superintendent lasted one term. In 1924, at the urging of the Iowa State Teachers Association, a special legislative committee met to investigate alleged illegal and unfair acts by the DPI. Francis was charged with raising the grades of teachers to permit them to receive certificates, refusing to accredit some consolidated schools, and arbitrarily refusing certificates to some entitled to them.

On a narrow vote of the committee, she was exonerated of all charges. But the investigation weakened her leadership influence. Francis completed the remaining two years of her term. She devoted much of her time to campaigning for improving the quality of the country school and trying to help the large number of small consolidated schools cope with financial problems.

In 1926 she was challenged in the Republican primary by Agnes Samuelson (a former teacher, Page County school superintendent, and extension professor in rural education at Iowa State Teachers College). Samuelson, who favored consolidation as a way of improving rural education, won the primary and the election.

Francis left Iowa and enrolled at the University of Texas, where she later became an instructor in the College of Education and earned a Ph.D. She also wrote two historical novels, two children's books, and a fourth-grade spelling book.

—by William L. Sherman
## RATING CARD FOR STANDARD RURAL SCHOOLS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Township</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Salary per Mo.</th>
<th>Total enrollment</th>
<th>No. months of school</th>
<th>Date of Inspection</th>
<th>Number of pupils belonging for six months</th>
<th>Average Daily Attendance</th>
<th>First date approved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### County Superintendent.

This school has met the requirements specified for standardization by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and should be designated as a standard school and receive state aid as provided by law. Should this school fail to maintain the required equipment and efficiency, I will remove its certificate of standardization and will notify the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

---

### Standard School—800 or more points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*20</td>
<td>Good foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*20</td>
<td>Roof and siding good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*10</td>
<td>Well painted exterior. Good windows with no broken lights, provided with locks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### B Class School—700 to 800 points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*30</td>
<td>Heated and ventilated by approved system (Underline: Basement furnace, room furnace)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*20</td>
<td>Separate cloakrooms, vestibule, and storage closet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*20</td>
<td>Twenty (20) square feet of floor space, and 220 cubic feet of air space for each pupil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### C Class School—600 to 700 points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*10</td>
<td>Good doors with lock and key</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*5</td>
<td>Outside platform with steps in good condition and provided with handrail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*10</td>
<td>Interior walls in good condition, tinted a light shade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*20</td>
<td>Windows supplied with good translucent shades and sash curtains</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### D Class School—500 to 600 points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*10</td>
<td>Outside platform with steps in good condition and provided with handrail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*10</td>
<td>Interior walls in good condition, tinted a light shade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*10</td>
<td>Windows supplied with good translucent shades and sash curtains</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### E Class School—below 500 points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*10</td>
<td>Outside platform with steps in good condition and provided with handrail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*10</td>
<td>Interior walls in good condition, tinted a light shade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*10</td>
<td>Windows supplied with good translucent shades and sash curtains</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

I. **GROUNDS AND OUTBUILDINGS**—120 Points

1. Grounds well cared for, in good condition, accessible, and removed from dangerous conditions
2. Trees, shrubbery, and flowers, attractively placed
3. Flag and flag pole with flag display in good weather (Statutory—Section 4253, School Laws of Iowa)
4. Adequate grounds, fenced against traffic hazards
5. Toilets—Two inside, separate, sanitary toilets, or two separate, sanitary, outside toilets, provided with latticed screen for entrance
6. Supervised play, and suitable equipment
7. Water supply—Good well or cistern supplying pure water
8. Walks—cinder, gravel, or cement— from schoolhouse to road, well, and toilets
9. Fuel room in good condition, well supplied with fuel and kindling

II. **THE SCHOOLHOUSE**—190 Points

1. Good foundation
2. Roof and siding good
3. Well painted exterior. Good windows with no broken lights, provided with locks
4. Good doors with lock and key
5. Outside platform with steps in good condition and provided with handrail
6. Interior walls in good condition, tinted a light shade
7. Windows on left, or left and rear of pupils
8. Windows supplied with good translucent shades and sash curtains
9. Heated and ventilated by approved system (Underline: Basement furnace, room furnace)
10. Separates cloakrooms, vestibule, and storage closet
11. Interior clean and tidy. Floors in good condition, smooth, tight, and properly treated for preservation
12. Twenty (20) square feet of floor space, and 220 cubic feet of air space for each pupil
13. Window space 1-6 to 1-4 of floor space
14. Twenty linear feet of slate blackboard the proper height, with chalk trays, good erasers and good grade of crayon
15. Provisions for community meetings: (a) Added space (b) Lighting system (c) Folding chairs
III. EQUIPMENT—190 Points

1. Single desks ........................................... 5
   Adjustable .................................................. 5
2. Movable .................................................. 5
   Properly placed .......................................... 5
   *No child seated so his feet cannot reach floor
3. Chairs for visitors ....................................... 5
4. Kindergarten table and chairs ............................ 10
5. Approved equipment for primary work .................... 20
6. Interior of room tastefully decorated ...................... 5
7. Display and bulletin board ................................ 10
8. Three good pictures framed—not more than one portrait included .. 10
9. Suitable dictionaries .................................... 10
10. Charts—reading, hygiene ................................ 10
11. Complete set of eight (8) up-to-date maps, including Iowa, evidences that they are used .................. 20
12. Globe—twelve inches in diameter; used daily ............ 10
13. School supplies .......................................... 8
14. Better equipment in ten approved records ............... 10
15. Other equipment:
   (a) Sanitary drinking fountain or covered cooler ..... 20
   (b) Sink and drain—or wash basin ....................... 10
   (c) Individual or paper towels ........................... 10
   (d) Liquid or powdered soap or individual cakes .... 10
   (e) Individual drinking cups if cooler is used ........ 20
16. Drinking and washing facilities:
   (a) Eagle drinking fountain or one covered cooler ... 20
   (b) Individual or paper towels ........................... 10
   (c) Individual drinking cups if cooler is used ........ 20
17. Display and bulletin board ................................ 10
18. Better equipment in ten approved records ............... 10
19. Other equipment:
   (a) Soap .................................................. 10
   (b) Sanitary drinking fountain or covered cooler ..... 20
   (c) Sink and drain—or wash basin ....................... 10
   (d) Liquid or powdered soap or individual cakes .... 10
   (e) Individual drinking cups if cooler is used ........ 20
14. Drinking and washing facilities:
   (a) Eagle drinking fountain or one covered cooler ... 20
   (b) Individual or paper towels ........................... 10
   (c) Individual drinking cups if cooler is used ........ 20
15. Display and bulletin board ................................ 10
16. Better equipment in ten approved records ............... 10
17. Other equipment:
   (a) Soap .................................................. 10
   (b) Sanitary drinking fountain or covered cooler ..... 20
   (c) Sink and drain—or wash basin ....................... 10
   (d) Liquid or powdered soap or individual cakes .... 10
   (e) Individual drinking cups if cooler is used ........ 20
18. Drinking and washing facilities:
   (a) Eagle drinking fountain or one covered cooler ... 20
   (b) Individual or paper towels ........................... 10
   (c) Individual drinking cups if cooler is used ........ 20
19. Display and bulletin board ................................ 10
20. Better equipment in ten approved records ............... 10

IV. LIBRARY AND SUPPLEMENTARY READERS—90 Points

1. Good bookcase used for books only ...................... 10
2. List of 100 books chosen from state bulletins .......... 20
3. Standard set of encyclopedias of recent date .......... 20
4. Supplementary readers for all grades from one to seven as listed .... 20
5. One current events paper—one farm paper .......... 10
6. One table for primary grades, with many varieties of primers and lower grade reading material .. 10

V. TEACHER AND SCHOOL ORGANIZATION—290 Points

1. Training:
   (a) College, including special training for rural schools .. 10
   (b) One year of previous experience (5) ................ 10
   (c) More than one year (5) ................................ 10
2. Professional attitude (10)
3. Teaching and discipline (35)
4. Industrious—trying to do required work (20)
5. Personal appearance and manner (10)
6. Community and social contacts (10)
7. Efficiency of teacher (Rankled by County Superintendent)
   (a) Professional attitude (10)
   (b) Teaching and discipline (35)
   (c) Classroom management and care of property (10)
   (d) Personal appearance and manner (10)
   (e) Community and social contacts (10)
8. Attention to physical education (10)
9. Attention to health and hygiene (10)
10. Attention to discipline (10)
11. Attention to reading (10)
12. Attention to instruction (10)
13. Attention to arithmetic (10)
14. Attention to other subjects (10)
15. Attention to attendance (10)
16. Attention to records (10)
17. Attention to discipline (10)
18. Attention to proper equipment (10)
19. Attention to general procedure (10)
20. Attention to miscellaneous (10)

VI. COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES—120 Points

1. Teacher Salary
   $10 above minimum (10) ................................ 10
   Each additional $5 (2) .................................. 20
2. Teaching and discipline (35)
3. Industrious—trying to do required work (20)
4. Personal appearance and manner (10)
5. Efficiency of teacher (Rankled by County Superintendent)
   (a) Professional attitude (10)
   (b) Teaching and discipline (35)
   (c) Classroom management and care of property (10)
   (d) Personal appearance and manner (10)
   (e) Community and social contacts (10)
6. Attention to physical education (10)
7. Attention to health and hygiene (10)
8. Attention to discipline (10)
9. Attention to reading (10)
10. Attention to instruction (10)
11. Attention to arithmetic (10)
12. Attention to other subjects (10)
13. Attention to attendance (10)
14. Attention to records (10)
15. Attention to general procedure (10)
16. Attention to miscellaneous (10)

COURTESY OF CEDAR COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
funds were insufficient “to care for all the schools meeting the standards,” as Francis reported. She recommended increasing the appropriation to $150,000. Unfortunately, Francis and the DPI lacked sufficient political clout, and improving country schools was not a priority for the Iowa State Teachers Association (ISTA) and other school leaders.

Instead of increasing funding, the legislature in 1927 now stipulated that the money could be used for improvements and apparatus, “but no part thereof shall be paid to any teacher for compensation.”

Nevertheless, DPI officials and country-school advocates continued to promote participation in the standardization program. Between 1924 and 1928 the number of standardized schools nearly doubled. But the level of appropriation remained constant, and the prorated amount dipped to $2.70 per student.

In 1928 the DPI revised the criteria and point system, converting it to a 1,000-point scale. Criteria for the schoolhouse and grounds were largely the same, but more specific requirements were spelled out for teacher preparation, classroom management, and community and social activities held at the school.

State Superintendent Agnes Samuelson pointed to particular progress: “Many two and some four year college graduates are teaching standard rural schools. Some of the schools have running water, electric lights, radio, telephone, manual training and home economics equipment, kindergarten tables and chairs, and a well organized Parent Teacher Association, or other community groups.”

Jessie M. Parker, who headed the DPI’s rural schools division, remarked on the program’s momentum in 1930: “Buildings have been painted inside and out. The cream ceiling and buff side wall tints . . . has given sunny, cheerful schoolrooms. Light shades, playground equipment, hot lunch equipment, and kindergarten tables and chairs, are found in practically all schools.”

Parker continued: “Many schools which have been on the standard list for several years wish to progress further in making the best possible rural school. To encourage this, the honorary rating of ‘Superior School’ has been established.” Qualifying schools had to be judged “standard” for three years and then score above 900. “The Superior School must have a teacher who is above average,” Parker commented, “a building and equipment of standard plus certain required features, a community enthusiastic in support of the school, and pupils doing excellent work.”

The “superior school” designation was honorary only and provided no additional funding. But schools now received a second bronze doorplate, this one rectangular with the words “Superior School.” In 1930 the first three Iowa Superior Schools were Bradford #4 in Chicksaw County (taught by Lela Martin); Eden #3 in Clinton County (Agnes Schnack); and Newton #4 in Jasper County (Grace Lynch). The number of superior schools would peak at 63 in 1940.

Participation in the standard and superior school programs continued to increase into the early thirties. By 1932, the program’s peak year, more than 30 percent (2,715) of Iowa’s ungraded one- and two-room schools qualified as standard schools, but by 1940 the number had dropped to 2,465. The Great Depression, a declining rural population, and reduced funding all took a toll on the program. The aid to standard schools had fallen steadily over the years, from the original $6 per student, to $3 in 1927, $2.70 in 1928, and then hovered around $2 in 1932 and 1933.

Still, administrators valiantly noted gains. In 1934, Parker recorded that “a large proportion of the state aid for standard schools has been used for building up libraries by adding supplementary readers and single copies of easy reference material on history, geography, citizenship and other school subjects. As a result of this concentration, reading in all rural schools shows a marked improvement.”

Two years later, Superintendent Samuelson remarked that “use of the school as a community center is recognized as one of the characteristics of a good standard school and parent-teachers’ meetings and those held under other auspices are doing much to sponsor school improvement in the community and to develop a more wholesome and satisfying rural life.”

Some might argue—and some did—that Iowa’s standard school program provided more funding to schools that were doing well, and did little to help those schools most in need. John R. Slacks, from Iowa State Teachers College, observed in 1939 that “the present plan of distribution of funds requires a district to have a good, well-equipped school before it can qualify for aid. The wealthy districts can do this without a great effort, but there are poor districts that cannot meet the requirements. . . . Would it not be more logical,” he reasoned, “to give aid to those districts with low taxable values? Surely . . . districts that have been given state aid for years have acquired enough interest and pride in their schools to keep them up to that standard without outside help.”

Nevertheless, schools that participated in the evaluation probably benefited from the process even if they did not score high enough to obtain the designation.